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Charges of racism lead arts panel to OK Black Heritage unit funds

By CHANNING GRAY
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — In a stormy, at times bitter meeting, the state Council on the Arts yesterday overturned its decision to withhold financing from the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society after a council member and a society staffer asserted that the grant denial was racially motivated.

At issue was whether the heritage society is an arts group or a historical one, but emotions got the better of several council members during the two-hour session, held at the agency's Wickenden Street office.

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GEORGE BASS, one of two black members of the council, said that to deny support to the society would "not only be unjust but precipitate unnecessary confrontation because it's a racial issue."

After voting to consider funds for the society, Bass and council member Anne Utter had a brief but heated exchange.

"What about white organizations?" asked Mrs. Utter, implying that race should not be a factor in deciding grants.

"They don't need" the money, Bass snapped.

At this point, council chairman Dan Lecht pleaded for order, saying loudly, "This is a formal meeting; let's act like we're at a formal meeting."

The council decided last year that the heritage society and the Rhode Island Historical Society would no longer get general operating support because they are not primarily arts groups. They can, however, apply for money for such art projects as exhibits or performances.

Most of the operating grants for the next fiscal year — awards totaling about \$260,000 — will be given out today and tomorrow during meetings at the Biltmore Plaza.

About two weeks ago, the council wrote to Rowena Stewart, Black Heritage Society director, reminding her that her organization was no longer eligible for this money under the agency's guidelines. Mrs. Stewart was unable to attend yesterday's meeting, but the society's research director, Rhett Jones, came in her place.

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"THERE MAY BE good reasons for sending

that letter," Jones angrily told the council, "but all I've heard are excuses for excluding one or two black arts organizations in this state."

Jones, who said that less than 2 percent of the council's budget went to black arts groups, asserted that the agency's decision to deny the society operating money was a "racial issue."

At the same time, the council agreed to consider giving operating money to the Providence Opera Theater, even though it never received an application from the company. Applications for grants being decided this week-end were due April 15.

But during yesterday's meeting, two unidentified men reportedly delivered a stack of program booklets from the opera company's past seasons, which were distributed to the council members. The council also was given a grant-application form dated April 13.

After discussion as to what might have happened to the original application, newly appointed council member Pat Nero, who is vice president of the musicians union, moved to consider the opera company for financing, saying the board had "opened the floodgates" by considering the heritage society.

Mrs. Utter voted against the motion. Mahler Ryder abstained.

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